12-15-74 Let Us PRAY - CHOIR - LIFT UP

Almighty + Eternal God, men have always called upon you out of the depths of need. In time of trouble - in times of sickness + tragedy - in times of perplexity + doubt - men have always prayed and in their praying sensed your presence. So, our father, we pray out of our need: so we come to you when we hurt; when we don't understand: when our lives seem to be drifting aimlessly. But father, in this season, we hear new music: in this time of Advent we sense, again, that you have come to us first - before our need. - that you have come among us to share our human experience - to laugh + cry with us. In this season we hear again that life-giving good news that your love for us is as intimate and personal as the birth of a child. And so, our father, in the good + warm spirit of Advent - we come to you - in deep gratitude: humble and yet full of joy + song + laughter.

Father we are grateful for the good news that each of us is important to you: that when we feel as if no one cares, we may ~~know~~ know that you care enough to give your son. We're grateful father, for the dignity + worth you have bestowed on us in that gift. We're not always comfortable with that: we're not accustomed to thinking positively about ourselves, and because of that we are often unable to think positively about each other. Break through our negativism, - our forced self deprecatims - Break through with grace and help us to rejoice in your love. Help us to see again that the birth of J.C. sanctifies + dignifies us - and all of your children.

Our father, we bring before you our concerns for others: we share with you our concern for those who are sick - lonely - depressed. Bring healing: come with love that brings hope. Stand w/ those who grieve. We pray, father, for our closest loved ones - those we often forget when we are being thoughtful + cheerful + kind - those who must sometime endure of pettiness. Bless them father. We pray, also, for people w/ whom we fail to get along - for those who irritate us - and who we irritate in return. Father teach us to love completely, honestly: teach us the difference between polite tolerance of others and accepting love.

Father we bring before you personal concerns - about which we worry, but share w/ no one. You know what they are. We hold them up before you in confidence - as children come to their father.

Almighty God, you have called us to be your people in the world. So we pray for a world that sometimes looks gray + dismal. We pray for world leaders - for our president + his advisers - that they will persist in seeking peace + justice. We pray for those less fortunate than we in the world - and among us. Give them hope in the midst of

despair. Hold us our father. For we are much better at criticizing from a distance than solving problems. Make us uncomfortable & push us into the world - as your special people.

Almighty + Et. God.- this is a good season to be in your church & involved with each other: open us to the many ways you keep revealing your love in our relationship. And walk with us in the days ahead as we prepare to ~~welcome~~ receive your gift again.

Hear us now as we pray the prayer our Lord taught his D.'s say —

The title of this sermon comes from a line in W.H.Auden's "Christmas Oratorio", For the Time Being;

> "Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree
> Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes -
> Some have got broken - and carrying them up to the attic.
> The holly and the mistletoe, must be taken down and burnt,
> And the children got ready for school.
> There are enough leftovers to do, warmed-up, for the
> rest of the week -
> Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,
> Stayed up so late, attempted - quite unsuccessfully -
> To love all of our relatives, and in general
> Grossly overestimated our ~~powers~~ powers.
> Once again as in previous years we have seen
> the actual Vision and failed
> To do more than entertain it as an agreeable
> Possibility, once again we have sent him away
> Begging though to remain his disobedient servant...."

The title of the sermon comes from that line and the point is very simple: namely, that the baby whose birth we celebrated last Wednesday was Jesus Christ. It's intent, frankly, is to ~~push a little bit~~ press the issue a bit. To borrow from the poem, to prevent the ("seeing the actual Vision and failing to do more than entertain it as an agreeable possibility.")

The Old Testament lesson this morning sets the scene.

Centuries before the birth the prophet had warned that men would not always accept, or even welcome, God's servant when He appeared. "Who has believed what we have heard?" he asked. An appropriate question for the first Sunday after Christmas. The prophet saw that the servant would not always be appealing, and that the

preconceptions of men regarding God's man well might prevent them from recognizing Him.

> "he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a dry root out of dry ground; he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him. And no beauty that we should desire him". (Isaiah 53:2)

Suddenly we are removed from the lovely simplicity of the nativity to the disturbing complexity of a man who didn't fit the pattern: a messiah who doesn't look like a messiah. Suddenly we are jerked away from the sentiment of a baby in a manger to the uncomfortable ambiguity of a man who always ended up loving the wrong kind of people and irritating the right kind of people.

And the prophet wouldn't let it go at that. Not only won't men be able to recognize Him: not only will God's Servant have to deal with men who don't like His looks; but violence and hatred will be directed toward Him. Suddenly we're facing the distinct possibility of a cross thirty years down the road.

> "He was despised and rejected..
> a man of sorrows acquainted with grief:
> And as one from whom men hide their faces
> he was despised, and we esteemed him not." (Isaiah 53:3)

Judaism knows that it isn't all sweetness & Hearts Honest to God —

Or take it from the New Testament - from the birth narrative itself. I wonder if St. Luke had any idea of the allegorical significance contained in his little vignette about there being no room in the inn? That, of course, is a precious and important part of the story. But let's remove the varnish for a moment: let's take it out of plastic and ceramic and music.

Let's contemplate for a moment a dirty barn, a feeding trough used in haste for a crib. But deal very judiciously with the inn-keeper.

He did what men have been doing ever since: what the prophet said they would do: what our culture, in fact, is in the process of doing this morning. He had other things on his mind: making money, for instance, from this year-end bonanza of cash customers. We can't very well fault him for that: it was his livelihood. And besides, a full-blown party was in process: the wine was flowing: laughter filled the air. Who had time to waste on Galilean peasants? The girl was very pregnant - unmarried, someone said. Very simply - there was no room. But, of course, the inn keeper didn't know who it was he was inviting to spend the night in the barn: and even his ignorance points toward the road ahead. For men have never been very good at recognizing God at work in their midst. That, remember, was the essence of the prophetic warning. That is still a problem. If the New Testament is to be trusted God is at work in the world where people are loved and accepted and fed and healed. If God becomes incarnate in the middle of history it is when justice is equal, when dignity is defended, when people are no longer used. Yet it is no easier, no more acceptable, no more popular to advocate those ideas today than it was to interrupt a good party by dragging in a couple of rag-tag Galilean peasants. (*)

Several years ago there was a much-promoted campaign to put Christ back into Christmas. But that's not the problem and never has been the problem. Our culture doesn't have any trouble with baby Jesus. Any man can smile benevolently at the infant. It's the man who gives us trouble. Someone recently observed that an American Christmas is a little like holding a birthday party and not inviting the honored guest.

at Christmas time, every television special dragged him in at the end. But there has yet to be, to my knowledge, an Andy Williams family Good Friday special.

(*) It is no easier to see God at work in the world today than it was to recognize him in that shabby scene in the barn behind the inn.

Who, in fact, has believed what we have heard? .. Everyone, it would seem.

Our culture has always included ~~bearing~~ heavy religious overtones. The New York Times Magazine last Sunday carried a major article on Prayer. The cover article in this week's Time is on the Bible. Religion not only remains a topic of rather wide interest, but most Americans feel religious: and the majority of those feel religious in a Christian sense. Whether or not Jesus Christ has anything to do with our cultural feeling of religiosity, however, is another question altogether. The dilemma could be addressed in a lot of ways and it is a major issue for the church. This morning I should like to document it by reading an excerpt from Catch 22, one of the most popular novels to come out of the Second World War. A Chaplain to a bomber group in Italy is being put on the carpet by his Colonel.

"We were speaking about conducting religious services in the briefing room before each mission. Is there any reason why we can't?"

"No, sir", the Chaplain mumbled.

"Then we'll begin with this afternoon's mission". The Colonel's hostility softened gradually as he applied himself to details.

"Now I want you to give a lot of thought to the kind of prayers we're going to say. I don't want anything heavy or sad. I'd like you to keep it light and snappy, something that will send the boys out feeling pretty good. Do you know what I mean? I don't want any of this Kingdom of God or Valley of Death stuff. That's all too negative. What are you making such a sour face for?"

""I'm sorry, sir," the chaplain stammered. "I happened to be thinking of the Twenty-third Psalm just as you said that."

"How does that go?"

"That's the one you were just referring to, sir. 'The Lord is my shepherd. [redacted]"

"That's the one I was just referring to. It's out...Haven't you got anything humorous that stays away from waters and valleys and God? I'd like to keep away from the subject of religion altogether if we can."

The chaplain was apologetic. "I'm sorry, sir, but just about all the prayers I know are rather somber in tone and make at least some passing reference to God."

"Then let's get some new ones. The men already are doing enough ~~bitching~~ griping about the missions I send them on without rubbing it in with any sermons about God or death or Paradise. Why can't we take a more positive approach? Couldn't we pray for a tighter bomb pattern?"

"Well, yes, sir, I suppose so," the chaplain answered hesitantly. "You shouldn't even need me if that's all you wanted to do. You could do that yourself."

"I know I could," the colonel responded tartly. "But what do you think you're here for?... Your job is to lead us in prayer, and from now on you're going to lead us in a prayer for a tighter bomb pattern before every mission. Is that clear? I think a tighter pattern is something really worth praying for. It will be a feather in all our caps with General Peckem. General Peckem feels that it makes a much nicer aerial photograph when the bombs explode close together"...

Colonel Cathcart began tramping back and forth reflectively.

....."I suppose we'll have to keep you waiting outside until the briefing is over, because all that information is classified. We can slip you in while Major Danby is synchronizing the watches. I don't think there is anything secret about the right time. We'll allocate about a minute and a half for you in the schedule. Will a minute and a half be enough?"

"Yes sir. If it doesn't include the time necessary to excuse the atheists from the room, ~~and admit the enlisted men.~~"

Colonel Cathcart stopped in his tracks. "What atheists?" he bellowed defensively, his whole manner changing in a flash to one of virtuous and belligerent denial. "There are no atheists in my outfit! Atheism is against the law, isn't it?"

"No, sir."

"It isn't?" the colonel was surprised. "Then it's un-American, isn't it?"

"I'm not sure, sir", answered the chaplain.

"Well, I am!" the colonel declared. "I'm not going to disrupt our religious services just to accommodate a bunch of lousy atheists. They're getting no special privileges from me. They can stay right where they are and pray with the rest of us."

The greatest challenge to the Gospel in this culture is the vague religiosity of a lot of well-meaning people. For it is a religiosity amorphous enough to feel good about the birth of a child without giving a second thought to the man the baby became. There is, that is to say, precious little room for the specific claims, the teachings, the ethical imperatives and moral standards which surround Christian Faith. It is not a problem of atheism and never has been. The late Bishop James Pike in his book A Time for Christian Candor points out that an authentic atheist is very rare: even an honest agnostic is hard to come by. But the world is filled with the indifferent: those, in his words, "whose diffidence is about like that of most people toward vegetarianism: it's nothing they've ever been involved in or particularly thought about." (P. 15)

That's the issue that presents itself on the Sunday after Christmas. And it seems to me that it is drawn more sharply on this day than on any other. The claim that the infant's birth was an act of God coming into human history is true or it is false. If it is true: if, in fact, the lovely story is the tale of God's love for men, it is the most astounding thing that ever happened.

If it is true that Almighty God has lived among us, then the world is a new and different place, full of hope and grace because of it. If it is true that the child was Jesus the Christ then what He did when He became a man ought to instruct and judge everything we do. If it is true that God gave that life - his life - to us as light in the darkness, as the promise of eternal life, then our lives - quite simply - ought to be given to following Him in happy gratitude.

If it is not true, then the whole thing - the Christmas story - the Church - the faith - ought to be opposed by men of good will as the cruelest hoax and most fantastic lie ever told.

He is our Lord. Or He is a most pathetic joke.

So the trees will be discarded: the decorations put away in the cardboard boxes, the children got ready for school. That is that - Or is it?

We have seen the actual Vision. We have entertained it as an agreeable possibility as has our entire culture. Let us not, this year, send Him away claiming lamely no room.

Amen.

Almighty God, our Father, we are grateful for the good and lovely celebration of Your Son's birth. It has warmed our hearts. It has brought us closer to each other. Now - as we return to normality, give us faith to be disciples of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.